WINTER PHEASANT FEEDING

Winter will end soon. Based on what has happened so far, 2003-04 won't go down as one of those seasons that warrants much talk in the future.

But it has generated significant conversation this year, if for no other reason than it marked the return of what people who live in the Upper Midwest consider a "real winter," a winter in which humans have had to readjust to snowblowing and bundling up after a few years when snowfall in much of the state was below normal, and temperatures were above normal.

While much of the state had little snow at Christmas, in the northwest, snow started piling up in late October. Ever since the final deer season closed in early January, Game and Fish Department wildlife managers have been busy trying to help farmers and ranchers keep deer out of their hay and other livestock feed supplies.

Winter eventually brought heavy snow and cold temperatures to the rest of the state. From early January on, deer were more likely to try to get an easy meal from an unprotected haystack, and pheasants were clearly visible against the white countryside, trying to scratch through snow to get at waste grain in drifted-in stubble fields.

A neighboring state wildlife agency on one side of North Dakota has offered advice for individuals who want to provide feed for pheasants, while at the same time reinforcing the message that exposure and predators, not starvation, are responsible for most pheasant deaths in winter. On the other side of North Dakota, another neighboring state wildlife agency is, for the first time, operating and funding a pheasant feeding program in part of their state where winter came early and is threatening to break snowfall records.

These are the types of circumstances and choices that arise within all state wildlife agencies in the Upper Midwest whenever winter takes a normal tact.

It's a scenario that has played out many times over the past several decades, and it likely will always be that way every time it appears Mother Nature is giving wildlife a bad time.

Concern for struggling wildlife is part of human nature. No one wants to see an animal starve to death, or freeze to death. But it happened before humans came to North Dakota, it happens now, and it always will. Sometimes, the land does not supply enough food, or enough protection, to support all of its creatures.

When European settlers began moving into North Dakota and altering the landscape, planting grain crops where prairie grass once grew, and trees where few existed, it changed some things for wildlife. Many species suffered and are still suffering because of reduced grassland and wetland habitat. Indirectly, other species have adapted to this altered environment.

Like pheasants, for instance.

Ring-necked pheasants aren't native to North Dakota – or North America for that matter – and they likely wouldn't have adapted to the Northern Great Plains climate without the habitat alterations that came with European settlement. Compare the bare feet of a ring-necked rooster to those of a native sharp-tailed grouse, protected by feathers all the way out to the toes, and it's easy to determine which one can better tolerate a northern prairie winter. Sharptails also have feathers that protect their nares or nostrils, which keep snow out and prevent suffocation.

Even so, pheasants can obviously survive in our climate, up to a point. They can live on waste grain and seeds in winter, and shelterbelts, tree groves, cattail wetland edges and other prairie habitat can provide enough cover for pheasants to ride out stretches of cold and snow.

Occasionally, however, snow is deep enough so waste grain is beyond reach, and wind and cold are severe enough that even well-fed pheasants are likely candidates for death.

In some years, these birds die by the thousands, not because they can't find something to eat, but because they aren't designed to survive the worst that winter can offer.

In some places, that's the case this year. That's why the Montana Game, Fish and Parks Department began sponsoring a pheasant feeding program in the northeastern part of the state in response to public concerns. In Minnesota, the Department of Natural Resources does not have an agency-sponsored pheasant feeding program, but it also does not discourage individuals from doing so – as long as citizens understand that pheasants rarely die from starvation. Exposure and predators are responsible for most winter mortality.

Craig Bihrle

In North Dakota, the Game and Fish Department by design does not have a program for widespread feeding of wildlife, and food is provided for deer only in extreme cases to keep deer from getting at a livestock hay supply. The Department does, however, have programs that can increase the type of habitat pheasants need to survive northern winters – to the degree their genetics allow it. North Dakota is the northern edge of the pheasant range; the farther north you go, potential for pheasant survival decreases, regardless of habitat quality or food supply.

This is not always popular when citizens seek help for starving wildlife. Here's a look at some of the factors that influence decisions on whether to feed wildlife during winter extremes, From Both Sides.

ONE SIDE

• Individuals or agencies that feed pheasants or deer can help a few animals survive the winter that otherwise may die.
• Pheasant or deer feeding initiatives are good projects for local clubs to help animals in specific locations.
• In some areas, feeding efforts could mean a few birds making it through the winter, compared to none. This might reduce the time it takes to repopulate an area.
• Feeding makes people feel they are doing something to help wildlife.

THE OTHER SIDE

• The apparent to need to artificially feed wildlife is an indication that natural food sources in an area are not adequate. Money and time would be better spent on creating natural habitat and food sources so animals can survive on their own.
• While some pheasants will die during difficult winters, they are much more likely to die from exposure, and this can happen even when they have full crops or gizzards. As such, agencies and individuals can spend a lot of money feeding wildlife, especially pheasants, that may die anyway because they aren't designed to withstand prolonged periods of sub-zero temperatures.
• Establishing feeding sites with grain or grain screenings could concentrate animals and increase the risk for disease and predation.
• Screenings often used for feeding pheasants can contain weed seeds, and could further the spread of noxious or other weeds into new areas.
• Once animals start coming to a feeding site, they will depend on that food for the rest of the winter. Feeding is a commitment many people are eager to undertake in the short term, but interest may wane as winter wears on, or if many more birds start coming in, which increases the cost. The result is that more birds die because they become dependent.
• Feed put out for pheasants can also attract deer and turkeys. Once these animals are acclimated to unnatural food sources, they will keep coming back.

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an email at ndgf@state.nd.us; call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.